

Masthead Logo

The Palimpsest

Volume 7 | Number 8

Article 4

8-1-1926

In Line with Progress

Ben Hur Wilson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wilson, Ben H. "In Line with Progress." *The Palimpsest* 7 (1926), 256-260.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol7/iss8/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

In Line with Progress

Few further extensions were added to the telegraph service in Iowa in advance of the railroads that were creeping slowly westward. In some instances, it is said, even after the railroads were built the wire did not follow immediately. The right of way of a train was determined by the kind of a flag it carried, while meeting places were arranged according to the time tables. While the Dubuque and Sioux City Railroad, now the Illinois Central, reached Cedar Falls on April 1, 1861, it was not until December 9, 1863, that the telegraph was completed to that city. But as a rule the railroad and the telegraph came together.

Work on the telegraph line between Burlington and Ottumwa was commenced in April, 1863. The Ottumwa *Courier* was of the opinion that the job would be completed by the latter part of May. But it was not until the spring of 1864 that the lightning messenger arrived, and not long afterward Eddyville was "connected with the world and the rest of man-kind by the telegraph." This line was built in conjunction with the Des Moines Valley Railroad, which was then pushing towards the State capital from Keokuk.

But the new line was very slow in reaching Des Moines. Meanwhile telegraphic news service was

rather unsatisfactory. "That dyspeptic telegraph running to Des Moines, is still declining in usefulness", commented the Winterset *Hawkeye Flag*. "It needs rest, and is getting it." In November, 1865, the local wire between Chicago and Des Moines, by way of Davenport, Iowa City, Grinnell, and Newton, was taken, in part at least, for use on the new Des Moines Valley line, leaving the *Register* at the mercy of the old transcontinental line which was monopolized by private dispatches.

Some of the railroad companies undertook to operate public telegraph lines in conjunction with their own business. For example the Chicago and North Western Railroad Telegraph Company built a line from Missouri Valley to Sioux City in 1867 along with the construction of the North Western Railroad. "Many of our people may not be aware that we are soon to have a telegraph in Sioux City, — or rather with one end in Sioux City and the other extending nearly all over creation", announced the Sioux City *Journal* on December 14th. By January 4, 1868, the telegraph posts along the railroad had been put up and the wires strung ready for the battery, which was to be put in position as soon as the depot building was ready, which would be but a few days longer.

During the great railroad-building epoch in Iowa, the railroad and telegraph came hand in hand. Perhaps it might be said that the "iron horse" was driven by the "iron cord", for the operation of

trains by telegraphic dispatch had become almost universal by 1870. Stringing the wire often preceded the laying of the rails. Contractors building grades and bridges needed to be in constant contact with their source of supplies. An operator was usually available along the advancing line, who, being equipped with a portable outfit, was enabled to "cut in", make ground connections, and establish immediate communication with headquarters. Telegraph offices were located at practically every way station, the depot agent being both station master and operator, and thus every railroad community, large or small, enjoyed the advantages of the "electric telegraph".

Of all who welcomed the advent of the telegraph the newspaper editors were the most enthusiastic. Fresher news meant wider circulation. The Council Bluffs *Nonpareil* began publishing a daily edition early in 1862 and well-established journals in other cities did likewise almost as soon as the telegraph line was in regular operation. The *Nonpareil* contracted to receive all of the dispatches of the Associated Press from New York, for which it had "to pay a good round sum." In April, 1866, the Des Moines *Register* announced that it had perfected arrangements to receive midnight telegraphic dispatches, which was a boon to the country papers of central Iowa as most of them relied upon the *Register* for the latest telegraphic news.

Telegraph offices were opened so rapidly that

there were not enough trained operators to fill the positions. The fascination of the wire attracted young men, offering a profession both congenial and remunerative. Many were self taught, learning telegraphy in their own homes by the assistance of a simple code and such crude instruments as a case-knife inserted between the tines of a table fork. Boy chums often pooled their meager funds, purchased a beginner's outfit, and built a line with broom wire running from house to house.

Business colleges added a course in telegraphy to their curriculum. In January, 1865, the school of Pratt, Worthington and Warner of Davenport introduced and successfully taught the subject of telegraphy, being one of the first schools in the country to do so. That same year a "telegraph department" was added to the Baylies Commercial College at Dubuque, the outfit consisting of three tape machines, costing fifty dollars each, five sounders, several relays, and other equipment. Similar courses soon became a part of every well-regulated business college, and for many years, until they were opposed by the Telegraphers Union, they attracted much patronage.

The telegraph operators were men of absolute dependability, for in the operation of trains where life and property were always at stake, only men of high character, keen minds, and meticulous accuracy could be employed. Many of them advanced rapidly, being promoted to positions of greatest

responsibility in the railroad and business world, for which their early training at the key had fitted them.

And now the telegraph, like other great institutions of service, has become universal. The worldwide transmission of ideas has been made easy and almost instantaneous. In the means of communication and understanding, the world is a unit. Supplemented first by the telephone, the radio has now come into general use for broadcasting entertainment, news, and culture. Yet the telegraph continues to fulfill the particular functions for which it is best adapted — and there is no dearth of business. Even the radio provides revenue, as recently when over two hundred and eighteen thousand congratulatory messages were received at Shenandoah as a result of Henry Field's radio anniversary party — a world's record by telegraph.

BEN HUR WILSON